

you don't envy. Some of them haven't any money at all, and some of them are dirty and ragged; but you'd give anything, Ezra Mudge, if you could go down the street in the morning and get some of the pleasant smiles and words that come to them. You didn't start out that way. You weren't that way when you used to come around to my folks' house, or when you got together the money to buy the mill. You weren't that way till—"

"Be careful what you say," broke in Ezra, but he was not unkindly this time. He looked in the direction of Louise.

"I won't say too much," went on Aunt Lyddy. "Ezra, can't you see things the way they are? Can't you see that to satisfy your own pride you've set hate in people's hearts, and made other people unhappy, and ruined a decent young man—"

"If you mean that young Eadbrook," interrupted Ezra, "don't you try to blame his foolishness on me, Lyddy. I'm not responsible. He had his chance—"

"I don't say he acted wisely, Ezra," the old woman replied. "But what kind of a chance was it you gave him? What kind of a chance did you give Walter—and the girl that cares for him—our little girl?"

AUNT LYDDY could go no further. She had made her supreme effort of revolt. She burst into tears and fled from the room.

Ezra saw her go. He would have followed, but his good sense retained him. His face twitched with unuttered emotions. His hands trembled. It seemed to Louise that he was near collapse himself. But he recovered himself, and said to the girl throatily: "This won't be good for her, Louise, at her age."

That was what Louise was thinking. But she felt the need of her utmost poise now. She answered:

"I'll go to her in a minute, dad. Don't worry."

Ezra chewed upon quick reflections. "She bore pretty hard on me, Louise," he muttered. "She made me out pretty bad." There was a pause. Then the old man continued:

"And you're against me, too."
"We're neither of us against you, dad," replied the girl quickly. "We both love you."

Ezra rested his hands upon his stomach and twirled his thumbs nervously. Finally he rose and said: "You go see your ma, Louise. I've got to think it over."

When Louise had seated herself on the bed beside Aunt Lyddy, and had taken the thin cold hand in hers that was warm with youth, and was patting the wrinkled forehead soothingly, they heard Ezra creaking back and forth downstairs.

"I feel sorry for him, Aunt Lyddy," whispered Louise.

"He's just what I've always said," returned the old woman. "He's a good man at heart. Wait till he thinks it over."

"Shh!" said Louise suddenly. "He's coming up the stairs."

THERE was a knock on the door, and Ezra entered. His face had cleared somewhat, as if he had arrived at some new determination. But he began in his old vein:

"There's always trouble when women begin to tell the truth."

There was no answer.

Ezra wavered.

"Lyddy," he added, "s'pose all this is true—what do you want me to do?"

Aunt Lyddy did not look at him. She replied:

"Just what you think you ought to do, Ezra."

"Maybe I was wrong—about some things," he went on. "Maybe I was a little mite hard on—on Eadbrook."

Aunt Lyddy sat up abruptly. It was the first time she had ever heard him confess that he was wrong about anything. She stared at her husband almost incredulously.

"I'd do—whatever you thought was the right thing. I sort—of need advice, Lyddy."

"No," said Aunt Lyddy decidedly. "You've always done the thinking for us, Ezra, and you can't stop now. You know

what's best to be done. I wouldn't have you do anything you didn't believe in."

"I don't believe in tinkering with Boxton," said Ezra stubbornly. "I couldn't join in any such scheme, Lyddy."

"I don't ask you to, Ezra. I know how you felt about this boosting business. I never asked you to be any different about that. Don't you see, Ezra, it's something altogether different? Don't you see—"

"If it was a matter of helping Eadbrook out in this mess, I don't know but I'd be willing to put him on his feet again," Ezra announced thoughtfully. "If it's a matter of a few thousand dollars—"

"But it isn't, and you know it," was the quick reply. "You've got to do something that money won't do, Ezra. Money will help. A rich man can afford to be generous as well as just. No; you haven't considered it enough yet, Ezra."

And so Ezra went downstairs again. They heard him ring the telephone. They strained to catch some hint of what he was saying; but, although the floor boards of the ancient house would creak in answer to his step, they let no words get through them.

"I wonder—" began Aunt Lyddy.

"I was wondering," replied Louise. They looked at each other, the two women, and smiled.

"We can't be up here while things are going on," said Aunt Lyddy, with a businesslike air. "We've got to see it through to the end, Louise."

When they came downstairs, Ezra was sitting in his accustomed chair. He knew what they wanted to ask. In the old days—even yesterday—it would have given him some pleasure to know that they were wanting to know—and he would not have satisfied them. Now he said simply:

"I telephoned Walter Eadbrook. I'm going downtown to see him."

WHEN Ezra returned, the two women studied his face, and their hearts fell. He had left the house with a queer, unusual gleam of hopefulness and expectation, and he returned tired and disappointed. They said nothing, however.

Supper went on the table. They ate as a matter of habit.

They had nearly finished when Ezra dropped his fork, hitched back his chair, and said:

"You're wanting to know what happened. I went down to see Eadbrook. I didn't waste words—you know, I don't mince, Lyddy. I had to tell him I thought he'd been as silly as a school-boy."

The two women looked at him helplessly. This was what he had done, then: merely another quarrel!

But Ezra went on:

"And what do you think? The young seamp admitted I told the truth!"

"But you didn't have to tell the truth. You didn't have to jump on him when he was down," crisped out Aunt Lyddy.

"Wait a minute," said Ezra. "I told Eadbrook I'd square up his losses. I said I'd put him on his feet again. I meant it, too. And I didn't make any conditions, either."

"What did he say?" asked both women in the same breath.

"He said he was much obliged, but he guessed he'd go it alone," replied Ezra succinctly. "He said the only kind of help he wanted now was a chance to help himself."

"Good for him!" cried Louise.

"I think it's just another piece of his foolishness," objected the old man.

"You don't think anything of the kind," put in Aunt Lyddy. "You think he's showing the manly spirit."

Ezra looked out the window a moment. Then he expressed his real thoughts.

"How am I going to do anything for anybody, if they won't let me?" he grumbled. But his grumble had something of pleading in it.

"Don't you think Eadbrook was right?" persisted Aunt Lyddy. "Isn't that what you'd have had him say if he—was your son?"

Ezra took thought. He replied slowly: "By thunderation, Lyddy, I don't know but 'tis!"

To be continued next week.

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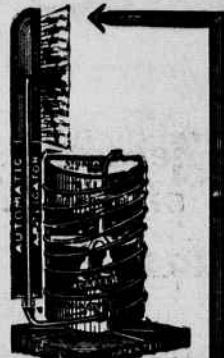
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